

ACUPUNCTURE FACIAL REJUVENATION

by Charles Yarborough, L. Ac.; from *Qi Magazine*

Every year, as February comes to a close, my answering machine fills with urgent messages. "Help me, please!" come the anxious voices. "The Oscars are a month away and I've got four new wrinkles on my forehead!" Working in Los Angeles, I've learned to anticipate the needs of entertainment professionals. They, in turn, have learned to appreciate Oriental Medicine. While they may rely on their MD's for certain services, they rely on their acupuncturists for others. Increasingly, patients are turning to Oriental Medicine for help in retaining a youthful appearance. The reason for the shift is simple: patients have discovered a downside to plastic surgery. Side effects and complications may include heavy scarring, chronic bruising, an unnatural "pixie-ish" appearance and the need for secondary procedures. In 2003, the wife of a well-known producer sued her doctor and a drug company, claiming she suffered nerve damage from Botox injections. While her claim was ultimately dismissed, its effect has nevertheless been profound. How, consumers wonder, can they escape the knife and the syringe?



Angelenos understand the importance of a youthful appearance. It isn't vanity; it's the survival instinct in a competitive town and it has created a booming spa industry. Local day spas compete eagerly for consumer dollars, offering ever-more outlandish and questionable enticements. One spa may offer a "five-layer hydrating mask with Burmese saffron glaze" (uh, do fries come with that?) while another spa, working the spiritual angle, may

tout the "nine Tibetan monks" who blessed the establishment (now that's a sacred retail outlet!).

Despite the foolishness that runs rampant in segments of the spa industry, one fact remains: youthfulness and attractiveness matter ... and not just in Hollywood. In 1999, psychologists Yolanda McKay and Sarah Stevenage designed a mock recruitment study at Southampton University. They found that recruiters hired 100% of applicants with normal appearance, yet hired only 55% with facial disfigurement. The implications of this prejudice are enormous. Not surprisingly, the spa industry has become the fourth largest entertainment industry in America, with revenues of more than eleven billion dollars in 2003.

A Beautiful History



Well before the current spa craze, Chinese women understood the social value of beauty. In the Tang Dynasty, theatrical performers used pearl powder when applying makeup, a practice that was quickly adopted by royalty and women in high society. It was discovered that, taken internally, pearl powder could improve the complexion and increase radiance.

Beauty was important for the common woman, too. Who knows when she might be brought before the emperor, along with thousands of other women,

as a candidate for marriage? In 1621, Ming emperor Xizing had five thousand beauties delivered to his palace and examined them all before choosing his bride. Ancient Chinese history is also peppered with heroic women who were famously beautiful: the patriot Xishi, who saved her people by seducing a warring king; Zhaojun, who married a Hun in order to maintain regional tranquility; Yang Yuhuan, who sacrificed her life to halt a mutiny. These heroines personify the Chinese belief that beauty is more than a pleasant arrangement of features on a face. Beauty must encompass character. We find this concept of feminine beauty expressed in the Confucian text, *The Lienuszhuang*, a collection of stories about great historical women. In it, the author Liu Xiang (79-8BCE) emphasizes the three-part development of virtue, talent and beauty. His text established the "lienu," or "the exemplary women tradition," which provided guidance for generations to come.

How Does it Work?



Practitioners of facial rejuvenation base their treatments on the ancient Chinese five-element theory, which allows them to understand their patients in terms of five energetic archetypes (wood, fire, earth, metal, water). In this system, internal organs as well as other features are represented by the five elements. A “wood person,” for instance, will be energized to a large extent by the liver, and will display certain characteristic emotional attributes related to it. She will also manifest a preponderance of

liver Qi in the shape of her body, her hands, head and facial features, in her skin tone and susceptibility to certain ailments.

As a rejuvenation treatment starts, the six pulses are taken, the tongue is read and needles are applied--not only on the face but on arms, legs, hands, feet and torso. A facial rejuvenation treatment involves the whole body, right down to the energetic level.

In her book, *Face Reading in Chinese Medicine* (Churchill Livingstone, Pub., 2003), Lillian Bridges looks at the many facial features that Oriental Medicine practitioners evaluate to understand a person’s energetic constitution, elements that will help in making a diagnosis and formulating a treatment. To create a five-element profile, she writes, the practitioner must “evaluate each feature of a group individually and then look at the entire set of features to determine the strength or deficiency.” She notes there are two kinds of faces, the one you were born with and the one you create. Simply erasing the past, she contends, is not possible or even wise; a person without lines is either lacking emotion or doesn’t express it. Rather than wipe (or stretch) the slate clean, it’s wiser to tonify organs and reprogram oneself emotionally so that unsavory habitual expressions become less frequent. In addition to providing a whole-body treatment, the

acupuncturist can work to remove fine lines and soften deeper ones. Wrinkles, however, are not necessarily Bridges' nemesis. "I think lines can be very attractive," she writes, "and show that you've lived life."

A Modern Pioneer

One of the modern pioneers of acupuncture facial rejuvenation is Mary Elizabeth Wakefield, L. Ac. Regarded widely as the dean of facial rejuvenation, she has trained over five hundred practitioners worldwide and maintains a busy practice in New York City. Her patented protocol, *Constitutional Facial Renewal™*, combines principles of Oriental Medicine with an advanced understanding of Western-based physiology. While some practitioners merely



needle along wrinkles in an upward-and-outward fashion, Wakefield says, "That's too simplistic. You must also work with underlying muscle structure." The whole body, she notes, must be kept in the equation, since "anything you work with constitutionally shows on the face." And so, when treating perimenopausal women, she says "we can work with hot flashes, we can work with imbalances in the system. During these sessions, they're pleased to find they tend to lose weight." It isn't just women who flock to Wakefield's door: men seek her help as well. "The job market is so competitive right now that they need to look younger. Those are the people who are getting the jobs." Wakefield's patients range from their late thirties well into their seventies. Often, she says, the older patients will look better surprisingly fast.

How soon can a patient expect to see results? "It is dependent on a few things, and this is important. These include genetics, post natal Qi—or, you can say diet. It's also dependent on proper sleep, elimination and the patient's stress level. These factors are more important than the age of the patient. You can have an 80 year-old with everything in

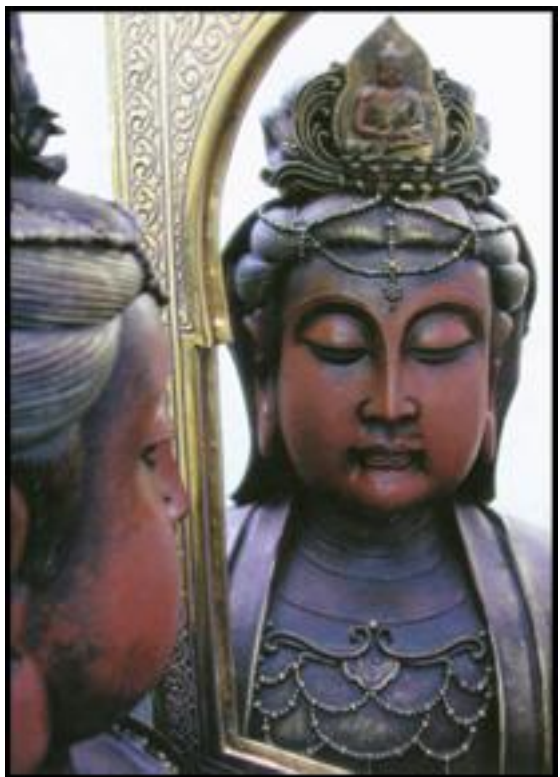
order, and he or she will look better and respond faster than a twenty five year-old broker who stays up all night drinking, smoking, who has a bad diet and poor genetics. In either case, with the first visit, you'll see more color and circulation in their faces, with small lines starting to fade, soon after. With approximately the fifth visit, you'll usually see deeper lines lessening, along with increased toning and elasticity in the face. If they're sunken and gaunt, they may start to 'flesh out.' Ten to twelve treatments are normally sufficient unless the patient is a smoker or has pronounced sagginess, in which case they may need twice the amount. It's an organic process, not a sudden lift, and I can usually tell after the first treatment how well they will respond." While the Western ritual of a "facial" has no roots in Chinese medicine, practitioners like Wakefield include customized Chinese herbal masks and moisturizers in their treatments, as well as bracingly cool jade rollers. With such pampering, it seems almost too luxuriant for the word "medicinal" ... but that's what it is.

Case Studies

The theories underlying facial rejuvenation may be ancient but how do they hold up in practice? To answer this question, Mary Elizabeth Wakefield opens her patient files to share some case histories. She describes a good looking, athletic, professional woman in her forties. Despite her beautiful skin, she has lots of forehead wrinkles, crow's feet, dark circles under the eyes, minor lines around the mouth and significant lines around the neck. In the five element view, the woman is a Wood-type: she is very goal-driven and tends to suffer stress-induced migraines. Wakefield's first task was to stabilize the migraines so that she could proceed with rejuvenation. After 12 visits and a few booster treatments, the woman's forehead lines were gone, as were the dark circles under her eyes. The lines on her neck had lessened by 55%. Now, says Wakefield proudly, "She looks fabulous!"

A woman in her 50's came to Wakefield very depressed and overweight.

During the course of her treatments, the woman, observing her own improvement, became happier and stopped over eating. With the weight loss, she shed her jowls and discovered an appealingly contoured face. So, apparently, did younger men. And so this, too, is a happy ending, aside from her embarrassment at being pursued by men twenty years her junior. Perhaps her admirers saw more than a pretty face, for, as Mary Elizabeth Wakefield says, "My intention in this is to empower beauty, renew spirit and enhance longevity."



For centuries, Chinese medicine has cultivated the intertwining vines of beauty, spirit and longevity. It's an optimistic and attainable vision of our potential, one that the cosmetic world needs. After watching a gory, televised facelift, with "bloody slivers of skin peeled off eyelids," and a fat globule preparing to "launch itself" out of an eye socket, the social critic Mark Dery offered an observation. In his book, *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink* (Grove Press, 1999), he described the modern man/woman's "cringing inability to confront the inescapable fact that beneath the hard, dry exoskeleton of our technology, we're still soft, wet biology, a 'nearly liquid mass' of soft tissues and bodily fluids that mocks the escapist fantasies of the age we live in by growing old, dying, and decaying, the prayers of plastic surgeons notwithstanding."

Acupuncture facial rejuvenation, based on sound medical theory, doesn't disassemble us or attempt to cheat the natural course of time. Informed by principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine, it gives us greater vitality and helps us, whatever our age, to look our natural best.

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